

The Infantile Neurosis

Genetic and Dynamic Considerations

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The Conception of the Infantile Neurosis at the Time of Little Hans and the Wolf Man

I assume that we take the case histories of Little Hans (1909) and the Wolf Man (1918) as outstanding examples of infantile neuroses, and the discussion of the processes involved in their disturbances as evidence of the then-reigning conceptions concerning this pathological manifestation.

When doing so, I suggest that we do not neglect in our evaluation one overridingly important difference between past and present. Psychoanalysis, at that period, was not concerned with infantile psychopathology as such. Interest and study were concentrated on the neuroses of adult life, their genesis, their dynamics, their relationship to normal character formation, their difference from the psychoses, etc. Infantile neurosis came within the focus of this interest only since it was one of the new findings made by means of the new technique that what is relevant for the formation of the adult disturbance are the underlying childhood experiences: i.e., that there is no adult neurosis, whether conversion hysteria, phobia or obsessional neurosis, which does not have a neurosis in infantile life as its forerunner. Moreover, what was demonstrated in the case histories named above was the fact that both, the adult and the infantile disorder, shared the same motivation by conflict, the same construction, the employment of the same mechanisms, and that their symptoms represented identical attempts at conflict solutions, inadequate as the latter may be if viewed from the aspect of reality adaptation. What I am describing here is, of course, the well-known formula which covers the formation of neuroses in general: conflict followed by regression; regressive aims arousing anxiety: anxiety warded off by means of defense; conflict solution via compromise: symptom formation.

It was assumed (though not proved at the time, since there were no longitudinal studies) that the finding that every adult neurosis is preceded by an infantile one is not reversible: not every infantile neurosis is followed by neurotic illness in later life. This was taken to have a number of implications such as the following:

that the infantile neurosis is more frequent, i.e., more "normal" as an occurrence than its adult counterpart;

that many infantile neuroses are open to a spontaneous cure which takes place at the point when the emotional upheavals of early childhood are lightened by entry into the latency period;

that it depends on the experiences of adult life whether the childhood conflicts will be reactivated, i.e., whether a new neurosis will be formed.